

# Defining Moments

BY BENJAMIN J. STEIN

SATURDAY

Every so often a moment comes along that clarifies something I had been wondering about. I had one of them today and it was about politics. Start with the obvious: I am a hard-working promoter of

## BEN STEIN'S DIARY

the Bush administration and the Grand Old Party generally. One of the many frustrations of this situation is the inability of the Republican Party to capture more than a small percentage of black, Jewish, and Hispanic voters. For example, I have often wondered why—despite what certainly seem to me to be good stands on Israel and affirmative action—the Bush campaign got so few Jewish votes. Why, despite Mr. Bush's obvious liking for African-Americans and his appointment of many of them to top government posts, does Mr. Bush register such low approval ratings among blacks?

Today, I perhaps got a great big part of the answer. I had lunch with a fine man I had worked with during the Bush campaign. I had never really gotten to know him, but today with several hours to spend, I learned about his life and times. In a word...he was born to wealthy parents; all of his friends seemed to be wealthy sons of wealthy parents; all of them seemed to be getting very rapidly more wealthy under the Bush regime. So far that generated only a bit of envy and resentment and a dull sense of annoyance that I often feel when I am around people who talk too much about money, who could be Republicans or Democrats.

Then, however, came the clincher. I asked the fellow where he liked to hang out here in glorious L.A. Without a moment's hesitation, he mentioned a club that is notorious for excluding Jews, blacks, and everyone else who

does not meet its race standards. He described the club so enthusiastically that I felt bound to tell him that I happened to harbor a certain amount of ill will toward the club in question for its racist policies. He was totally unfazed, maybe even encouraged by my comments. "Yes," he said, "it's old-fashioned. They wouldn't even take Tom Hanks when he applied. They don't take actors." He said it with what seemed to me to be happiness, almost giddiness.

Now, I happen to feel sure that Tom Hanks would be welcome at any club with any sense. But I also happen, among other things, to be an actor and a Jew, two marks against me at his club, and it stung me that my fellow GOP activist was so obviously proud of his ability to get into a club that would not

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take people like me. "Wait a minute," I thought to my little self. "Why am I bothering to work and travel and speak for a party that has functionaries who take such delight in excluding people just like me from their socializing? Have I made a terrible mistake here?"

I bid goodbye to my colleague and then I walked home. As I did, I calmed down and I realized that my interlocutor's attitude was hardly typical of Mr. Bush or Mr. Cheney or any of the men and women at the top of the party, who pointedly refuse to be members of clubs that discriminate in any way. And certainly the GOP as an institution obviously respects men and women of every possible race and subgroup, gives them jobs, and pays attention to their wants.

And on every important issue, from right to life to defense to foreign policy, the GOP's positions are my own.

Still, the impression my conversationalist had left with me is obviously the impression the GOP leaves with far too many voters: that its core constituency is country-club white men who take joy in being exclusionary. This is incredibly hurtful and insulting to people who do not happen to be white Episcopalians. If I, a lifetime Republican, son and grandson of Republicans, felt this sting of exclusion, what must the ordinary Joe or Jane with an ethnic background think?

Maybe the impression is wrong. In fact, I know it is. But this impression absolutely has got to change in a big way if the GOP is going to have a future. The Republicans are already getting about as many white male Protestant voters as it is possible to get, and still Mr. Bush barely won, and the GOP holds Congress by a whisker. Mr. Bush now has the bully pulpit to let the

world know that the GOP is not a racist country club, that it is in fact as open to hard-working, decent, law-abiding men and women of every race as any other party. Mr. Bush won the last election by astounding luck. This nation is now a rainbow quilt, like it or not, where voters with color in their cheeks and ways of worshipping different from the mode at the club hold the balance of power. If he does not lead the party out of the clubhouse and the 19th hole and into the 'hood and the barrio and the shul, if he does not show that the GOP really is the big tent, he could be the last Republican president for a long time, or maybe the last one ever.

Mr. Bush, with his intense affability and absolute lack of racist feelings, is

the man to do the job and the time is now. Nelson Rockefeller did it with almost total success in New York a generation ago, with a name far more likely to suggest exclusivity than Mr. Bush's, so it can be done. I know that George W. Bush is already working at it, but he and his fellow leaders need to work at it harder. Every day the task of inclusion is avoided is a day closer to oblivion for the Grand Old Party.

## TUESDAY

**O**h happy day. I am in Lexington, Virginia, home of many different colleges, but especially Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute. I am here to give a speech. It's early spring and a few leaves are appearing on trees, and I am happy.

I flew in last night to Roanoke. I was met there by two students from W&L, Dustin and Chris. They were cheerful, well-organized, delightful guys. We drove along a highway choked with big trucks to Lexington, where I checked into a really pleasant Hampton Inn. This is getting to be a lesson I am learning in my travels. Inexpensive hotels in pleasant, friendly small towns are often more accommodating and cheery than very *cher* hotels in big cities.

Anyway, this morning a Freshman from W&L named Brett took me on a tour of the campus. I saw where Robert E. Lee is buried (I am a huge buff of the Civil War and a great fan of R.E. Lee), where his repose statue is (an astonishingly well-wrought work of sculpture in the nave of a chapel bearing Lee's name, with Confederate battle flags in each corner of the nave), where his horse, Traveller, is buried. I saw the lovely buildings and library. In the Special Collections section, I saw many letters from Lee in his ultra-neat handwriting. I am always moved by his farewell letter to the Army of Northern Virginia. It's not at all clear that Lee wrote it himself, but he certainly edited it, and he signed it, and it's touch-

ing. ("With an unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you all an affectionate farewell.") His words reflect such courtly gentility they simply move one to tears.

Then, the plum in the pudding, a tour of Lee House, the house where R. E. Lee lived and where he died in 1870. He had been president of what was then Washington College for five years after the Civil War and he died on a cot in the dining room looking out at the mountains. "Strike the tent" were his final words, or so it is said. I was shown around the house by Dr. John Elrod, the president of Washington and Lee University, and his beautiful, elegant wife. President Elrod is a famous student of philosophy. He is tall, extremely dignified, with an engaging manner. He's my new hero for his welcoming and unpretentious ways. I have to learn more about him and become more like him. That's my new goal.

The house is much larger than it looks from the outside, with open, airy rooms. It has great antiques, and a chair that was given to Lee by Jefferson Davis. Dr. Elrod invited me to sit in it and I did, conscious of my own insignificance as I almost collapsed into such a low chair.

Washington and Lee is where I want Tommy to go to college. Here's why: It's in a beautiful spot in the Shenandoah Valley. The students, male students, wear jackets and ties to class. It's on the honor system. It has fraternities, which I like a lot. They are a fine way to learn to be a friend. It has something called "The Speaking Tradition." This means that when anyone from the school passes anyone else from the school, each has to greet the other. That is one of the most civil ideas I have ever heard of. Plus, Dr. Elrod holds open house every afternoon and students and faculty can just come by to see him and (I assume) his stunningly lovely wife.

And, the school has high academic standards. I think it's just about per-



*"Not the real you? Well, of course it's not the real you. The real you is bald."*

fect. I plan to take Tommy there soon and start preparing him to attend the school. If he can get in, which is a *BIG* if.

I also was shown VMI. It has a whole different look, but I liked it very much also. I love the story about the young cadets from VMI rushing to the battle of New Market and filling a hole in the Rebel lines with their young bodies. So much courage at such a young age.

Anyway, tonight I gave a speech at the Lee Chapel. I cannot even start to tell you what a thrill I got standing at a lectern in front of the statue of General Lee. It was exhilarating and humbling at the same time. The audience was super friendly and smart, laughing at my little jests, smiling and nodding to show they got it, delightfully open and intelligent young people. It is my dream come true to be around such people. I hope and pray that people like them exist when my son is ready for college (if he ever is).

Afterwards I signed autographs for about two hours at a reception. Then off to a nearby Wal-Mart to buy some toiletries. Have you ever been to a giant ultra Wal-Mart? You cannot believe its size. Like a whole city of groceries, appliances, clothing, toys, cosmetics, shaving cream, shampoo, batteries. A cascade of America's bounty.

(Oh, I forgot to mention a trip to Dustin's and Chris's frat house, where the boys were, again, well-dressed, good-looking, and alert. It is across from the Kappa Alpha House, a frat founded on respect for Lee, but apparently also very much indebted to Lee's great-great-grandson, who runs a distillery that makes Virginia Gentleman spirits—although note that General Lee did not believe that men should imbibe.)

Anyway, I love Washington and Lee, and I slept well in my room at the Hampton Inn. If you miss the gentility of life that's almost been smothered in modern America, try two things: watch

George W. Bush on C-Span and visit Washington and Lee.

#### WEDNESDAY

**A**nother great day. I got up in Lexington and my fine, talented guide, Dustin Olson, drove me to Roanoke through the rolling, lush Shenandoah Valley. Then a rather rude United Express woman made me sit on the tiny plane for an hour before it took off. (She lied about when the doors were closing.) I sat next to a cheery man who is head of a huge realtors' trade group. He, like your humble servant, was en route to D.C. for a big GOP congressional fundraiser that night at the Washington Hilton. We talked happily about how much we like Mr. Bush, and then arrived at Dulles. I had to walk forever to find my car, but finally I did and got to my hotel. The River Inn. Gloriously homey and welcoming. Endlessly friendly. What a hotel should and must be if you do it right.

Wifey had just flown in from L.A. We rested. I went to my apartment (formerly my parents' apartment) at the Watergate, looked at old photos, at stamps my mother had collected, and at a surprising find: an envelope marked "\$1 bill with peculiar face of Washington."

Sure enough, inside was a dollar bill with Washington looking a bit like Alfred E. Neuman. It made me cry, when I thought of my mother's fine sense of humor and delicate eye to have spotted it—a tiny irregularity—and catalogued it, perhaps just so that I would find it some day and be reminded of her sweet drollery.

Of course, of course. A little *bon ton* from my Mom to make me smile and cry.

The gala at the Hilton was delightful. The rock star "Meat Loaf" was the MC and he was fabbers. Lively, brash, and self-confident. "I am here to tell you that I am a rock star and I am an active Republican." I came on and added, "I am a TV star and I am from

Hollywood and I am a *Jew* and I am a Republican, too."

I told a few jokes and the audience roared. I sat next to a wonderfully kind man of about my age named Whitacre. He runs SBC, an immense telecom. He was wry, kind, and extremely self-effacing. Plus as smart as a whip. Next to us was Mr. Cheney, also smiling and self-effacing, laughing and joking about his diet. He gave a short but fine speech and got immense applause. I cannot tell you how cheery everyone in the room was: David Dreier, one of the smartest, most effective men in the Congress, Tom DeLay, always a voice of good common sense, Mr. Davis, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, from Northern Virginia and a smart, agreeable fellow. Mr. Thomas, head of the Ways and Means Committee, and his very cheery, pleasant wife (as down to earth as only a Republican MC's wife can be). Just great, friendly people.

How I love being back in my hometown of Washington, D.C.

I went back to my apartment at the Watergate after the event and stood on my balcony and looked at the Potomac. How many times I had done that and come back inside and had my mother offer me grapes and my father ask me how my life was going. And now? Oh, well. The town is still there and it's warm and reassuring.

#### THURSDAY

**O**ops. Maybe not. Now, here is a tale. A couple of months ago, a man from C-Span asked me if I would address the Congressional Radio and TV Correspondents' Dinner in D.C. First hint of trouble: they could not pay even close to my standard fee. Still, Washington, D.C., is my native city, so I said yes. Second hint of trouble: extreme difficulty with the folks from C-Span making travel reservations. Still, I went ahead and came to D.C. Next hint of trouble: when I got to the

Washington Hilton, instead of the usual cheerful men and women greeting me, there was no one at all. No one to help find the right room, no one to help us hang our coats. We were like wayfaring strangers begging for a room at the inn, not the supposed main entertainment. Fourth hint of trouble: when I got to the reception room, instead of the usual friendly folks talking to me and acting cheerful, there was a sort of self-conscious coolness in the air with only a few hardy souls talking to me. Fifth hint of trouble: those few people who did talk to me warned me over and over that this was a crowd that was impossible to please. That they had dissed Geraldo Rivera and Imus and Bob Hope and took pride in being cool to whoever from "Hollywood" appeared. This should have been enough hints. Alas, they were not.

However, VP and Mrs. Cheney appeared, and they were super friendly and nice. Oddly, no one from C-Span or anywhere else was there to entertain Mrs. Cheney while the Veep was getting his picture taken. No problem. I have had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Cheney and Mr. for about 25 years, although very slightly, so my wife and I entertained her. She is pretty, smart, and filled with stories, so it was a joy.

Then Mr. and Mrs. George W. Bush came in, and everyone flocked around. He was his usual lively, cheerful self. Mrs. looked beautiful, as always. Again, oddly, no one had been delegated to talk to Mrs. Bush. So I was lucky enough to spend a fair amount of time with her. No press photos really do her justice. She is amazingly beautiful, alert, utterly unpretentious, and a joy to be with. Decorum forbids telling what we talked about, but imagine a talk with a really great neighbor, and you have it right there.

Then we lined up and went in to the dinner. I had the stupendous treat of sitting on the dais between Mr. and Mrs. Bush. Thrill enough for anyone. Again, modesty forbids describing the

conversation in detail. But it was about the merits of various kinds of cars, about Yale vs. the University of Texas as a place to drive, about relations with China in a very light way, about some of the various dignitaries in the room,

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about Camp David and the swimming pool there. And more about the various dignitaries in the room, once again.

Then Tim Russert was given an award for his TV journalism. Then Mr. Bush gave a hilarious speech making fun of himself. He was extremely self-critical and mocking in a good-natured way. The crowd was enthusiastic.

And then it was my turn. I told the crowd that if they laughed a lot I

would be brief and if not I would stay all night. Some jerk immediately started laughing like mad. I told a joke about John Hinckley and Bill O'Reilly. The audience loved it (although note, some wags later

claimed they had found it indelicate). Then I made a huge error. I told a joke I often tell making fun of Bill Clinton's sexual appetites. Ted Kennedy, Madeleine Albright, and Joe Lieberman did not laugh. The GOP people I could see did laugh. But the Dems—and the room was largely broadcast correspondents—were, as Queen Victoria said to her PM in a famous interlude, "not amused." They

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sat on their hands and from then on, I had lost them. I told a number of jokes that always in the past have found good reception, but the audience of the night did not like them except for the GOP people I could see down in front.

I shifted to a plea to the people in the room to spend less time worrying about global issues and about the money supply, and more worrying about their families. Some response, including spontaneous applause, but not a huge amount, to put it mildly.

to describe the dignitaries in the room. I will keep them to myself, but they showed a lot of consideration and a certain insight.

Wife, as usual, was very encouraging and kind and said everyone near her was laughing like mad. Mr. DeLay was kind, again. Why does the press act so mean to him? And Bill O'Reilly was very kind and invited me on his show, and Tim Russert hugged me and told me how much he loved my remarks about family. But all in all, it was a dismaying experience. And, as might have been predicted, no one from C-Span helped us find our coats or get back to the hotel. We were left as much alone as we had been when we arrived. Scribes and pharisees have better things to do.

## **They loved someone making fun of GWB, even if it was GWB. They hated even a syllable of criticism of Bill Clinton, and maybe they just did not like me.**

I shifted gears and told of how the president should use the surplus to get baseball back to D.C. Good response. How he should use more of it to re-open Garfinckel's, a specialty store that had been a great treasure of D.C. More applause. Then

Suddenly I recalled that family values are not big in this crew. Anyway, I ended on a note I had heard from John F. Kennedy, that "here on earth, God's work must truly be our own," or something like that. Applause, but not a lot of applause.

Mr. and Mrs. Bush were gracious and so was the Veep couple, and so was Tom DeLay. But all in all, it had been a distinctly uncomfortable evening. As I stood at the podium, I kept thinking of the Biblical stories of the "scribes and the Pharisees" and their sanctimony. And there I was, speaking to scribes (journalists) and Pharisees (the liberal establishment in D.C., as close to the Pharisees as can be imagined in modern Western life). What a waste of my time and theirs. They should have just had one of their own speak to them in a language they could understand. They loved someone making fun of GWB, even if it was GWB. They hated even a syllable of criticism of Bill Clinton, and maybe they just did not like me. Then why did they invite me?

Anyway, the evening was a thrill in the respect of getting to spend so much time with Mr. Bush. And Mrs. Bush. And the Cheneys. Still, I wished I had been back at Washington and Lee or with those nice congressional Republicans the night before.

Well, there is little in life I cannot learn from and I will have to think of the lessons here: maybe Mr. Bush gave me the best lesson in some thoughtful and brief words he had offered to me

### **FRIDAY**

**T**his is much better. I spoke today for one of my favorite causes: adoption. I spoke to about 400 lawyers and social workers in Columbus, Ohio. Mostly women, mostly Democrats, at least at my table, including the former Weatherman leader, Bernadine Dohrn. They were wonderful. Loved my jokes, were super friendly, intelligent, self-sacrificing people filled with the best of the human spirit. And they loved my jokes, even the ones about Clinton. So, it's not really a party thing. It's maybe a Potomac Fever thing. Well, I can't worry about it forever. It was one disappointing evening in an avalanche of happy days and nights for little me.

As I flew back, I studied my book, *Ordinary Heroes*, by a man named Casalini, about Medal of Honor winners. It's got great photos of them and short but moving text about how they won their medals. It made me sob. How blessed I am to be their heir. How blessed to be in America, the greatest miracle of all time. Every day in this country is a gift from on high. And for those last night who did not laugh at my jokes, I think we have a saying about people who can't take a joke. 🐘

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Through a series of coincidences, I met a colleague who had access to what he referred to as "old documents." With my interest piqued I asked him to show me one. I was taken to an old garage and shown several antique, wooden crates caked with dust. On the side of each crate, on faded, yellowed paper were the words: "Constitution Lithographs. H. Fuller Atwood. 1933."

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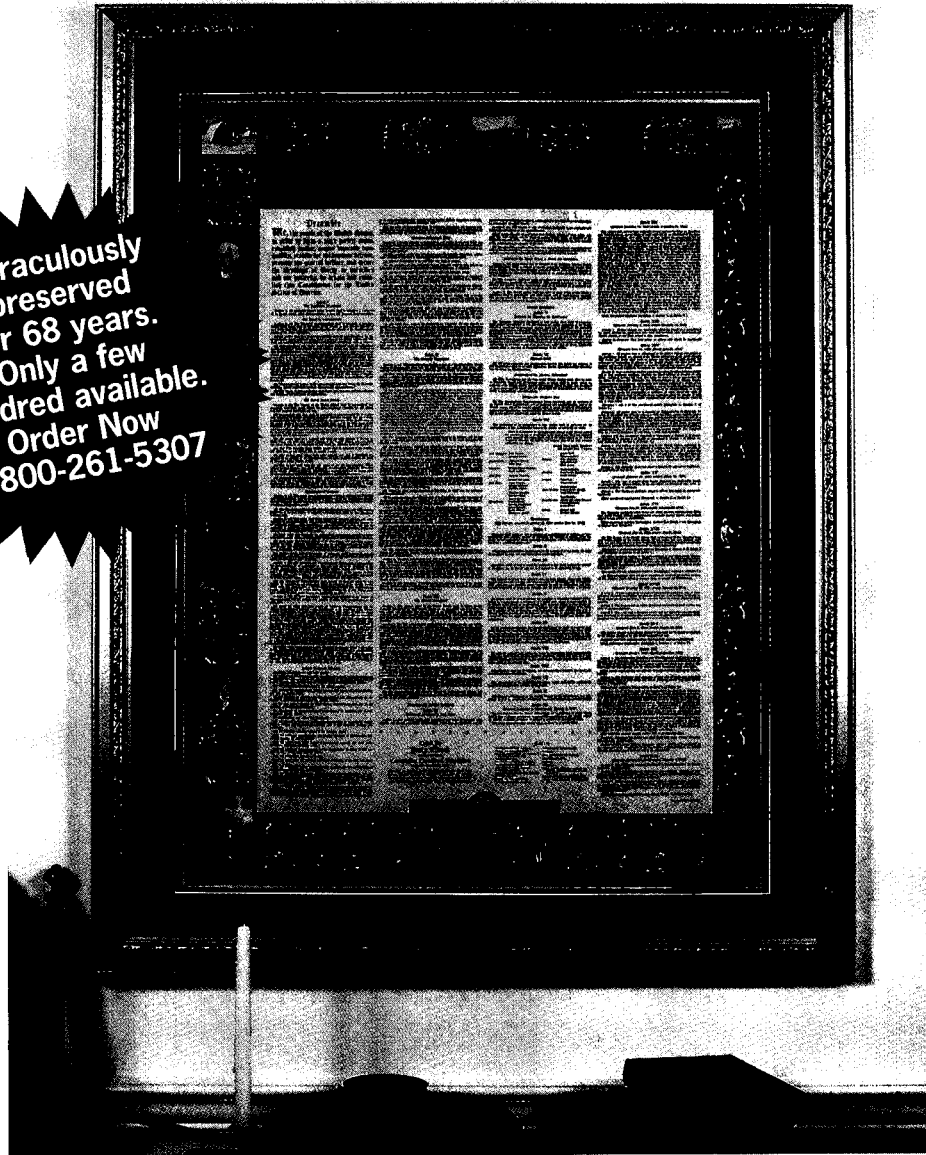
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TAS107

# The B&S Inn

BY ANDREW OBERRITER

**T**he B&S Inn is set back far enough from the road that you'd think it's another of the run-down houses in Oakville, NY. The squat two-story building does declare itself by way of cutout plywood letters nailed

## GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES

next to the front door, not that you'd notice. As soon as Bruce (the "B" of B&S) tacked the name up, Sharon (the "S" of B&S) came along and painted it the exact same dark green as the wall behind it. All this ensures that the inn is a joint for the locals, which is how everyone involved likes it.

Inside, the B&S is clean and much brighter than one might expect. There are no dark corners, thanks to the wall lamps, all of which are fashioned to look like

**Membership is extended to anyone who doesn't ask for booze on credit and doesn't get so drunk he backs his Ford two-ton into the building while trying to find the road.**

candelabras, complete with faux dripping wax. Bruce is proud to tell you that he got them real cheap at an auction.

The walls are paneled in pine. The wood somehow catches the lamplight, turns it the color of the horizon the moment after sunset, and then releases it again. Coupled with a little bourbon it can seem like the entire place is bathed in a golden glow that doesn't emanate from anywhere in particular.

Those walls also hold a 20-year chronicle of the lives of the regulars. Scattered throughout are pictures of guys holding record-breaking bass or the first buck of the season. Plaques record the winners of the summer horseshoe tournaments and winter snowmobile rallies held out back. Laminated newspaper clippings preserve birth announce-

ments; slightly fewer are obituaries.

Bruce is the curator of the walls, collecting the pictures and clippings, making sure everything is tastefully framed before finding the right spot for exhibition. When not hanging artifacts or pouring whiskey and suds, he sits on a stool at the far end of the plank bar, beneath the one television. Bruce is the TV remote control, responding automatically to requests for channel changes. He is a large, taciturn man who has gotten larger and more taciturn every year that he has spent behind the stubby L-shaped bar. He reacts to everything by nodding. He nods when you step through the door, he nods to acknowledge drink orders, he nods at punchlines. This gives him an air of

unquestionable authority. The only way to know if Bruce likes you—or if he even remembers your name—is to check the wall every so often for anything related to you. Despite my fervent unspoken hopes, I am not on the wall.

Sharon is tiny and efficient, like the kitchen she runs. She does all the cooking and her menu has been pretty much the only truly consistent thing in the regulars' lives over the last two decades. She has served, with no variation, the same six dishes on the same nights of the week since the B&S opened: Monday, goulash with bread and butter; Tuesday, corned beef with boiled potatoes and vegetables; Wednesday, meatloaf; Thursday, spaghetti (if you ate there the night before, the meatballs will seem familiar); Friday, fish fry; Saturday, mystery leftover

casserole. On Sunday Sharon rests, by which I mean she scours the kitchen from top to bottom.

Then there are the patrons. The B&S is a curious sort of members-only club. Membership is extended to anyone who knows the place is there, doesn't ask for booze on credit, and doesn't get so drunk he backs his Ford two-ton into the building while trying to find the road. That last criterion might seem like a joke, until you realize that the clientele is comprised mainly of paycheck drinkers. These are men whose idea of sobering up is to switch to beer an hour before they drive home. Occasionally one of them has a hard time not hitting huge stationary objects as he goes.

There are quite a few regulars, but they all seem to share the names Walt, Jerry, Buck, or Wayne, except for Merve, who is named Merve. They're hard to get the measure of right off. They all looked 45 when they were 30, but then stopped aging, preserved by the alchemy of cheap beer, chewing tobacco, and Sharon's cooking. They've lived hard lives working construction or state road details.

But hard lives yield great stories. I've heard many yarns spun from a stool at the B&S. There are the stories that begin with "You wouldn't believe

